**They Vote Right but Think Left | Professors Gilad Hirschberger, Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler and Camil Fuchs**

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**A series of surveys and studies conducted over time shows that a large majority of the Jewish population supports separation form the Palestinians but not annexation | The disagreement: those on the right prefer unilateral initiatives, while those on the left prefer negotiations | The bottom line: The public feels safer when the right implements the left’s ideology | Annexation in the eyes of the Israeli public—not what you thought**

“When we win, we will continue to make history. When we win, we will apply Israeli law to all the Jewish settlements in the Jordan Valley and Judea and Samaria.” This declaration by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on the eve of the March 2020 elections and shortly after the publication of President Donald Trump’s “Deal of the Century,” created the impression that there is a broad consensus among the Israeli public in general, and among right-wing voters in particular, regarding the annexation of all the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria to Israel.

Moreover, conditioning the annexation on victory in the elections positioned the issue as a so-called influence on the elections and as a form of incentive for the Israeli voter to vote for the right-wing bloc. But does the Israeli public in fact want to annex the territories, and do its positions about annexation actually influence its voting patterns?

In a series of surveys we conducted together with Prof. Camil Fuchs from the Midgam Institute on representative samples among the Israeli Jewish population during the years 2018–2020, we examined the positions of the public regarding the annexation of the territories in comparison with other solutions to the diplomatic-territorial issue. We monitored changes in the public’s views over time and examined whether the various diplomatic solutions predict voting patterns in those elections.

The findings present a complex and somewhat counter-intuitive picture of the connection between the public’s political identity (along the right-left spectrum) and its diplomatic-territorial positions. The findings also shed new light on the question of annexation and show that for the Israeli Jewish population, unilateral annexation **is not** viewed in the same way as is annexation through diplomatic agreement, and in general, the diplomatic-territorial issue is not at the center of the Israeli voter’s priorities.

Lastly, we found that although the public’s diplomatic positions do predict their voting for the right or the left bloc, surprisingly, the public in general is interested in changing the situation and separating from the Palestinians. The argument between right-wing and left-wing voters is primarily on how to accomplish this and accompanying concerns.

**They Want to Separate**

The central and most important finding that emerges from the surveys we conducted is that while a large proportion of the Israeli Jewish population defines itself as right wing (about 60% in our and others’ surveys) and votes for the right-wing bloc (there is a strong majority for the ideological right in the Knesset), there is a mismatch between the political identity, voting patterns, and diplomatic positions of this population.

In our surveys, the respondents ranked the degree of their agreement with four diplomatic-territorial solutions: annexation of the territories; the two-state solution; unilateral Israeli separation (evacuating settlements east of the security barrier, declaring that Israel has no territorial claims east of the barrier, and the IDF remaining in the territory until an agreement is reached); and the continuation of the status quo. We also asked the respondents to select what they considered the best option of the four.

In the five surveys we conducted over the course of nearly two years, support for the two-state solution shifted from 47% in November 2018 to 40% in April 2020. If we add to this that the support for separation that ranged from 22% to 28% during the same period, the overall support for solutions involving separation from the Palestinians stands at 62–75%—a strong majority among the Jewish Israeli population.

It is interesting that even among Likud voters, whose chosen party leader explicitly expressed support for annexation in his election campaign, almost half of respondents support solutions that involve separation. In contrast, the support for annexation among the Israeli Jewish population was only between 16% to 26%, and the status quo, which some call creeping annexation, received minimal support (9–13%).

These findings will surprise only those who have not followed the views of the Israeli population in recent decades. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) publishes its National Security Index annually, and in its recent index (2019–2020), respondents (only Jewish Israelis) were asked to choose among several alternatives: seeking a complete peace agreement with the Palestinians (37% support); transitional arrangements for separation from the Palestinians (23% support); annexing the settlement blocs in Judea and Samaria to Israel (17% support); annexing all of Judea and Samaria to Israel and creating one state (9% support); and continuing the status quo (14% support). In other words, according to the INSS Index, 60% of the population supports solutions involving separation, whether they involve two states or unilateral steps, whereas only slightly more than a quarter (26%) support annexation.

A survey conducted by the Geneva Initiative in March 2021 also found a high degree of support for the two-state solution, even among voters for the parties headed by Lieberman, Saar, Netanyahu, and Bennett (23–53%). It is possible that center-left voters voted for right-wing parties in the recent elections out of a desire to oust Netanyahu, and this can explain the disparity between the public’s voting patterns and its diplomatic positions. We believe there is an additional central reason that can explain the disparity, which in fact has been present for years, even when the issue of ousting Netanyahu was not on the agenda. Although a clear majority of the Jewish Israeli population supports solutions to the conflict that involve separation, it expresses concerns about the security consequences of such steps. We define this concern as a perception of a **physical threat**.

In contrast, only a minority of the population, mostly on the left of the political map, is concerned that continued Israeli rule over the territories will endanger its Jewish-democratic identity. We call such a concern a perception of an **identity-symbolic** **threat**. The perception (perhaps exaggerated) of the physical threat, along with the lack of perception of an identity-symbolic threat can explain the Israeli political paradox—why Israelis vote right while they hold diplomatic-territorial views championed by the center-left.

**“The Deal of the Century” as an Illusion**

The surveys we conducted also shed strong light on the issue of annexation, which received a great deal of attention preceding the recent third round of consecutive elections. Our surveys, along with the findings of other surveys, lead to the conclusion that only about a quarter of the Israeli population supports unilateral annexation. Additional surveys, such as the Israeli Voice Index and surveys by the aChord Center and the Geneva Initiative conducted during the same period also reached similar conclusions—a clear Israeli majority opposes unilateral annexation.

When the application of sovereignty over some of the territories is presented as part of a diplomatic agreement or plan, the picture of support by the Israeli public changes significantly. For example, in a survey we conducted (in April 2020) we asked, “Is the annexation of all the Jewish settlements to Israel as part of the ‘Deal of the Century’ a good idea in your opinion?” A clear majority (54%) agreed, less than a quarter either disagreed (23%), or were undecided (23%).

The Israeli Voice Index (August 2019) also found that most of the public supports annexation as part of the Trump plan (42% in favor, 33% against) and that support increased within half a year to 49% (February 2020). Surveys conducted by News 12 and Kan 11 reached similar findings.

When the findings of these surveys were published, certain journalists rushed to interpret them as public support for unilateral annexation. A closer look refutes this interpretation and clearly shows that the Israeli public not only does not support unilateral annexation, but also does not view the Trump plan as a plan for unilateral annexation.

Here is the evidence. First, when we asked, “Do you agree that in exchange for annexing all the Jewish settlements, the State of Israel should allow the formation of a Palestinian state?” 41% expressed support for the establishment of a Palestinian State with or even without annexation. Only a quarter (26%) expressed support for annexation on the condition it is not in exchange for establishing a Palestinian state—which is, in fact, the same quarter of the population that continually supports unilateral annexation.

In other words, the majority supports the framework of a two-state agreement and understands the Trump plan as a sort of bilateral agreement that includes the annexation of Jewish settlements to Israel alongside the formation of a Palestinian state. To better confirm that indeed the support for the plan does not entail support for unilateral annexation, we focused on that part of the population that indicated that it prefers the Trump plan to the other alternatives. An analysis of this group shows that the vast majority of supporters of the plan (70%) supports the creation of a Palestinian state with or without annexing the settlements.

This result need not surprise us, because the plan to annex the territories to Israel involves consent to the creation of a Palestinian state, the transfer of Israeli land to Palestinian sovereignty, and a Palestinian capital in parts of Jerusalem—foundational principles of all the diplomatic plans for a two-state arrangement.

Of course, there are significant differences among the various plans regarding the scale of Israeli annexation, and the size of sovereign territory that Israel must forego. Yet in the view of the Israeli public, the Trump plan, which has been dropped for now, is a new variation of the same old two-state solution.

**Creeping Annexation**

As of this writing, there is a majority among the Israeli public that supports solutions involving separation, but the trend over time is of erosion in support for the two-state solution. The INSS has found that support for the two-state solution decreased from 71% in 2006 to 55% in 2019.

Our findings (from 2018 to 2020) show a continuation of this trend, with a distinction among the various policy alternatives. In the first survey we conducted in November 2018, we found that 47% of the Jewish population supported a permanent agreement, 28% supported separation, 16% supported annexation, and 9% supported continuing the status quo. That is, 75% of the public supported solutions involving separation and only 16% supported annexation. However, in our last survey, conducted in April 2020, we found that support for a permanent agreement decreased to 40%, support for separation decreased to 22%, and support for annexation rose to 26% and support for continuing the status quo rose to 13%. In other words, in 2020 support for solutions involving separation decreased from 75% to 62%, whereas support for annexation increased to 26%.

A similar trend was found in a survey conducted among Israelis and Palestinians by the Tami Steinmetz Center of Tel Aviv University in collaboration with Khalil Shikaki from Ramallah. While in 2010 support for the two-state solution among the Jewish-Israeli population stood at 71%, in 2017 it reached a relative low point of 47%—as we also found in late 2018.

Thus, independent surveys conducted by various scholars and research institutes show a clear picture—there is still a clear majority among the Jewish Israeli public that supports solutions involving separation rather than annexation, but over the years, there has been an increase in support for the idea of annexation and a decrease in support for solutions involving separation.

Therefore, it is no surprise that support for annexation increased significantly in September 2019, as during this time, Netanyahu changed his vague approach regarding the future of the territories (since the Bar-Ilan speech in 2009) and began to express clear support for annexation, and even declared that Israel would soon annex territories.

**The Israeli Political Paradox**

Social psychology has long recognized that attitudes do not always match behavior and there are significant disparities between positions and values on the one hand and actual behavior on the other hand. Studies conducted in the past have shown that positions on the diplomatic-territorial topic predict voting behavior in Israel, but these studies were conducted during a period when negotiations were being held with the Palestinians and it is unclear whether today too, during a time of a diplomatic freeze, positions on the diplomatic-territorial issue affect voting patterns in elections.

To examine this question, we took the results of the five surveys we conducted during the years 2018–2020 and conducted a series of analyses aimed at examining the factors affecting voting patterns among the Israeli population voting for right-wing rather than center-left parties. The analysis showed that beyond known variables, such as age, political position, and level of religiosity, which predicted voting in the expected direction (those with right-wing positions, those who are more religious, and those who are younger vote for the right), the public’s positions on the diplomatic-territorial issue and their views of the threats predict voting patterns in elections, but in a slightly surprising way.

First, the public’s position on annexing the territories **only barely** (0.5%) predicts voting for the Knesset. In other words, despite the campaigns and media noise on the topic, annexation is not a topic that affects the Jewish Israeli population’s voting patterns.

In contrast, support for the two-state solution and for unilateral Israeli separation significantly predicts voting. For example, while support for the two-state solution expectedly predicts voting for the left, support for separation actually predicts voting for the right. This non-intuitive result indicates that left-wing and right-wing voters are not necessarily divided on the question of separation from the Palestinians, but, rather, are more divided on the way such separation should be performed and their degree of trust in the Palestinian partner.

Left-wing voters are interested in a bilateral process, whereas right-wing voters seek full Israeli control over the process, especially as it pertains to the security components. Similarly, a perception of physical threat predicted right-wing voting more strongly than did diplomatic-territorial views, whereas a perception of the identity-symbolic threat predicted voting for the left.

Simply put, the Israeli public is more influenced by a perception of threats than by political ideology and votes for parties that address its existential anxieties. Because the right is seen as the side that protects Israel’s security interests, it is clear that the public feels safer when the right implements the left’s ideology, as in the case of the peace treaty with Egypt and the disengagement from Gaza.

In the Israeli view, the definition of the political right and left coincides with positions about peace and territorial compromise. The political right, even before the state’s founding (“Two Banks to the Jordan”) and especially after the Six Day War and the conquest of the West Bank, is identified with an ideology of annexation and opposition to giving up land in exchange for peace, whereas the Israeli left, from acceptance of the 1947 partition plan to the Oslo Accords and associated agreements, is identified with agreement to forego conquered land in exchange for diplomatic arrangements. Yet while among politicians and political organizations there is an identification between political belonging and support for a policy on the future of the territories, this is not the case among the general public.

In-depth study of public opinion surveys over the years, and especially during the stormy period of the 2019–2020 elections, reveals a significant disparity in the Israeli public between political identification, voting behavior, and diplomatic preferences regarding the future of the territories.

Although the idea of annexation has a stronger hold among the right and the two-state solution more support among the left, in general, most of the Israeli public disapproves of unilateral annexation. Even on the right, and especially among Likud voters, there are many who support steps to separate from the Palestinians and support the framework of two states for two peoples.

We have termed this phenomenon of diplomatic positions considered those of the left being held by those identifying with the political right and voting for the right “the Israeli political paradox.”

**They Want a Safe Peace**

The lack of correspondence between territorial positions and political identity and voting patterns stems primarily from the issue of physical security being at the top of Israeli citizens’ priorities. Surveys show that voting for the right stems largely from the feeling that personal and national security are in safer hands when the right is in control. Moreover, whereas public support for a diplomatic agreement with the Palestinians is high, it is accompanied by a security concern that withdrawals will lead to an intolerable physical threat.

Added to the high awareness of the physical-security threat posed to Israel’s citizens is a lower awareness of the possibility that if Israel continues to control the territories that contain millions of Palestinians, the country faces a grave threat to its character as a Jewish and democratic state.

Thus, the diplomatic-territorial positions of the public appear to be overruled by its view of threats. In other words, although most of the Jewish Israeli population is interested in separating from the Palestinians and believes some sort of territorial compromise should be made with the Palestinians, concern about the security consequences of such a compromise causes Israelis to put their trust in the right-wing parties that reject diplomatic compromise from the outset.

The low level of awareness of the threat to the state’s Jewish and democratic identity arising from continued rule over millions of Palestinians in Judea and Samaria is an additional factor behind voting for the right, because awareness of this threat does not actually serve as a counterweight to an assessment of the physical threat that occupies most of the attention of Israel’s Jewish citizens.

The findings of the surveys place a question mark on the generally held assumption that the Israeli public’s move rightwards means that it is not interested in peace and reconciliation processes. The surveys’ findings show clearly that the Israeli public as a whole prefers pragmatic solutions to the conflict. There is a stable majority in the Israeli population that supports steps to separate from the Palestinians and only a small minority supports a policy of unilateral annexation.

Although support for the two-state solution has eroded over time, the fact that it remains the most popular territorial outcome among the Jewish Israeli population, despite over a decade of a stalemate in diplomatic negotiations, indicates the Israeli public’s basic support for diplomatic compromise even in periods when compromise doesn’t seem possible.

The separation the Israeli public makes between its territorial positions and its support for the political right leads to great confusion and mistaken assumptions, such as the assumption that voting for the right means support for unilateral annexation of the territories. The analysis presented here points at the complexity of the topic, exposes the Israeli political paradox, and shows the main parameters motivating the Jewish Israeli population’s voting behavior during the 2019–2020 elections.